

# CRUELITIES<sup>1</sup>

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*From Harper's Magazine*

THE bell tinkled as Mrs. Tyarck entered the little shop. She looked about her and smiled pityingly. The dim cases and counters were in dusty disarray, some cards of needlework had tumbled to the floor, a drawer showing a wrinkled jumble of tissue-paper patterns caught the last rays of the setting sun.

"Of all the sights!" was Mrs. Tyarck's comment. "She needs some one to help her. She needs new taste. Them buttons, now, who'd buy 'em? They belong to the year one."

Scornfully the shopper eyed the shelves where were boxes of buttons dating back to periods of red and black glass. There were transparent buttons with lions crouching within; there were bronze buttons with Japanese ladies smiling against gay parasols; speckled buttons with snow, hail, and planetary disturbances occurring within their circumscribed limits, and large mourning buttons with white lilies drooping upon their hard surfaces. Each box had a sample button sewn on its cover, and these sample buttons, like eyes of a bygone century, glimmered watchfully.

Mrs. Tyarck penetrated a screen of raw-colored worsteds suspended in fat hanks from a sort of clothes-line stretched above the counter. She sought the proprietor of the little shop. In the back of the store, barricaded by a hodge-podge of scattered merchandise, was a door leading to a private room. Toward this door she directed a commanding voice:

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"Frenzy! Frenzy Giddings! How long I got to wait here?"

There was an apologetic stir in the back room, the gentle click of a spoon in a saucer, soft hurried creakings, then a bony hand pushed back a faded curtain. Miss Frances Giddings, known among her acquaintance as "Frenzy," peered from the privacy of her kitchen into the uncertainties of the shop.

"I shall be with you presently."

When the tall figure finally emerged, her feet shuffled in carpet-slipped indecision, her glasses glimmered irresolutely. In another woman there might have been, out of recognition of Mrs. Tyarck's impatience, bustling haste and nervous despatch. In Miss Frenzy Giddings there was merely slow, gentle concern.

"I am at a loss to explain my unreadiness," said the punctilious, cracked voice. "Usually on prayer-meeting nights I am, if anything, in advance of the hour, but tonight I regret exceedingly that, without realizing the extent of time, I became over-absorbed in the anxieties of my garden. Now select the article you desire and I will endeavor to make amends."

"What ails your garden?" asked Mrs. Tyarck, carelessly adding, "I come in for some new kitchen toweling; that last I got down to the other store was slazy."

Miss Frenzy, with careful inefficiency, lifted down and arranged on a dusty counter three bolts of toweling. With deliberation as unconscious as it was accustomed, she unwrapped the three, the cracked voice explaining, "The perturbation to which I allude is the extraordinary claims made upon me by rose-worms."

Mrs. Tyarck, peering in the dim light, carefully examined the toweling. She pulled a few threads from one bolt and, with the air of one who protects herself against systematic fraud, proceeded ostentatiously to chew them.

"This here toweling gone up any?" The threads of the assayed linen still lingered on her thin lips as she decided. "If it's the same price it was, I'll take two yards." Then, returning to the question of lesser importance, "Well, I can't help you none with them worms until you tell me whether they're chewers or suckers."

Miss Frenzy, putting on a second pair of glasses over those she habitually wore, now essayed the project of cutting off the two yards of toweling.

"Chewers or — er — ahem, suckers? I really cannot say. Shall you be astonished at my negligence when I tell you that I have not yet taken the measures to determine whether these worms are, as you so grotesquely term them, chewers or — er — ahem, suckers?"

Mrs. Tyarck laughed sarcastically. "For Heaven's sake, Frenzy Giddings! it's a wonder to me you know *anything*, the time you take with your words! You ain't acquainted with your own stock, I see, for here you've cut me off two yards of the twenty-cent when I asked for the ten-cent. Well, it's your mistake, so I'll take it as if 't wuz what I'm payin' for; but look here, Frenzy, you've no call to be wool-gatherin' *your* time of life."

The rough criticism had no effect upon the native elegance of the old shopkeeper. She smiled at Mrs. Tyarck's outburst with an air of polite, if detached, sympathy. Dropping her scissors, she turned to the window, poking her head between hanging flannel nightgowns to remark:

"Pleasant weather and many taking advantage of it; were I not occupied I, too, should promenade."

Mrs. Tyarck meanwhile creaked about the little store on a tour of inspection. Some especially frivolous sets of "Hair Goods" underwent her instant repudiation. "I wear my own, thank God!" she exclaimed, adding, "it's good enough for Tyarck and me." Picking up a cluster of children's handkerchiefs, she carried them to the window for more complete condemnation, muttering: "Ark-animals and butterflies! Now what's all *that* foolishness got to do with the nose?" As Mrs. Tyarck stood apostrophizing the handkerchiefs there was a whirl outside the store, the toot of a claxon, a girl's excited laugh, the flash of a scarlet jersey and tam-o'-shanter. The two women, lowering their heads after the furtive fashion that obtains in country districts, took the thing in. They stared after the automobile.

"Pleasure-riding, I see," remarked the near-sighted Miss Frenzy. "Young folks appreciate the automobiles;

the extreme velocity seems peculiarly to gratify their fancy!"

Mrs. Tyarck pursed up her lips; she looked with narrow speculation after the pair, her thin face hardening.

"Them two is going out to the Forked Road Supper House," she prophesied. "No daughter of mine wouldn't be allowed to set foot in that place. Well, you 're lookin' at two of a kind. That red sweater of hern won't help her none."

Miss Frenzy, now sorting change in slow pensiveness, demurred. "She is young," she remarked. "She entered the store recently for some scarlet wool for that very jersey" (Miss Frenzy was at pains to avoid the word "sweater"), "and I observed her young cheeks—quite like peaches, yes," insisted Miss Frenzy, sentimentally, "quite like peaches—I could wish that she should be careful of her complexion and not ride too extensively in the cold air."

"There's more to be thought of than complexions, these days," said the other woman, coldly. There was relentless judgment in her face, but she went on: "Well, 'tain't meetin'-time yet. Say I step back and take a look at them worms 'n' see ef there's anything I can recommend."

The thin figure of the shopkeeper preceding her, and Mrs. Tyarck casting looks of disparagement on all she passed, the two took their way into the little garden. Here, enclosed by high palings, shut away from everything but sun and air, was Miss Frenzy's kingdom, and here there came a sudden change in her manner. She did not lose the careful elegance of the polite shopkeeper, but into gesture and voice crept an authority, the subtle sense of ownership and power invariably felt by those who own a bit of land, who can make things grow.

"Step judiciously," she admonished her visitor; "my cucumber-frames are somewhat eliminated by the tall verdure: here and there I have set out new plants. I should deplore having my arrangements disturbed."

Mrs. Tyarck sniffed. "You and your garden!" she ejaculated; but she resolutely made her way, eyes squinting with curiosity. Settling her hat, whose black wing



stuck out with a virtuous swagger, Mrs. Tyarck gave herself all the married woman's amusement over the puttering concerns of a spinster.

Soon, however, as the two women stole farther into the dense square of growing things, the envy of the natural flower-lover crept into her sharp comments. "My!" she said, jealously—"my! ain't your white duchy doin' good? Say, look at them gooseberries! I suspect you don't have no particular use for 'em?" It was said of Mrs. Tyarck that she was skilful at paving the way for gifts of any kind. She made this last suggestion with a hard, conscious laugh.

All around the little garden was a fence like the high fences in London suburbs. Close against it honeysuckle poured saffron cascades, a mulberry-tree showed the beginning of conical fruitage. Blackberry vines sprayed white stars over a sunny bit of stone wall. Amid a patch of feathery grasses swayed the prim carillons of canterbury-bells; soft gaities of sweet-williams and phlox were massed against the silvery weather-boarding of Miss Frenzy's kitchen. As the two women, skirts held high, paused in front of the white-rose bush the indefatigability of the chewers and suckers was revealed. Already thousands of young rose leaves were eaten to the green framework. Miss Frenzy, with a sudden exclamation, bent to a branch on which were clusters of dainty buds.

"Ah-ah! *Millions!*" she whispered. Then, tremulously defying the worms: "*No, no, no! How dare you? Hi, hi, hi!* there's another! Ugh! Look here! Mercy! See that spray!"

With every ejaculation, shudderingly emitted, the bony hand went out like lightning, plucked something gingerly from a leaf, gave it a swift, vindictive pinch, and abhorrently tossed it away.

"That's right," nodded Mrs. Tyarck. "Squeeze 'em and heave 'em—it's about all you can do. They'll try to take advantage of you every time! There's no gratitude in worms! They ain't pertikler. It don't mean nothing to them that roses is pretty or grows good. They want to eat. Squeeze 'em and heave 'em! It's all you can do!"

There was a distant tinkle of the store bell. Miss

Frenzy, absorbed in her daily horror, did not hear this. "Ugh! Ugh!" she was moaning. Again the long hand went out in a capturing gesture. "There—there! I told you so; quantities more, *quantities!* Yet last night I was under the impression that I had disposed of the greater majority."

Mrs. Tyarck's attention was diverted from the rose-worms and concentrated on the deserted shop. "I heard the bell," warned that accurate lady. Then, reprovingly: "Don't you never have any one to keep store when you're out here? You'll lose custom, Frenzy. What's more, if you ain't careful, you'll lose stock. Ivy Corners ain't what it used to be; there's them Eastern peddlers that walks around as big as life, and speakin' English to fool everybody; and now, with the war and all, every other person you see is a German spy."

As she spoke a large form appeared in the back doorway of Miss Frenzy's shop and a primly dressed woman entered the garden. She had a curiously large and blank face. She wore a mannishly made suit of slate-gray, wiry material, and her hat had two large pins of green which, inserted in front, glittered high on her forehead like bulbous, misplaced eyes. This lady carried a netted catch-all distended with many knobby parcels and a bundle of tracts. As she saw the two in the garden she stretched her formless mouth over the white smile of recently installed porcelain, but the long reaches of her face had no radiance. The lady was, however, furnished with a curious catarrhal hawking which she used parenthetically, like comment. What she now had to say she prefaced with this juridic hawking.

"Well, there ain't no responsibility here, I see! Store door open, nobody around! Them two young ones of Smedge's lookin' in at the things, rubbin' their dirty hands all over the glass case, choosin' what's their favorite dry-goods! All I can say is, Frenzy, that either you trust yourself too much or you expect that Serapham and Cherabum is going to keep store for you."

Mrs. Tyarck turned as to a kindred spirit, remarking, with a contemptuous wink: "Frenzy's rose-worms is on her mind. Seems she's overrun with 'em."

Mrs. Capron, the newcomer, strode up the little path to the scene of action, but at the sharp exclamation of Miss Frenzy she halted.

"Have a care!" said the gaunt shopkeeper, authoritatively. She waved a bony hand in ceremonious warning. "I should have warned you before," explained Miss Frenzy, "but the impediment in your way is my cat-trap. It would seem that I am systematically pestered with marauding cats. The annoyance continuing for some time, I am obliged to originate devices that curtail their penetrations."

Mrs. Capron, indignantly whisking her skirt away from a strange-looking arrangement of corset steels and barrel staves connected by wires, strode into some deep grass, then gave vent to a majestic hawk of displeasure:

"What's this I got on my shoes? Fly-paper? For the land's sake! Now how in the name of Job do I get that off?"

Mrs. Tyarck, ingratiatingly perturbed, came to the rescue of her friend; the two wrestled with adhesive bits of paper, but certain fragments, affected by contact, fulfilled their utmost prerogative and were not detachable. When they were finally prevailed upon to leave the shoe of Mrs. Capron, they stuck with surprising pertinacity to the glove of her friend. The outcries of the two ladies were full of disgust and criticism.

"Well, Frenzy Giddings! You need a man in here! Some one to clean up after you. All this old paper 'n' stuff around! It's a wonder you don't get into it yourself, but then *you* know where to step," they said, grudgingly.

Miss Frenzy hardly heard them; she was still peering carefully under the leaves and around the many clusters of babyish rosebuds. "Ah-ah!" she was still saying, shudderingly. Out went her hand with the same abhorrent gesture. "After all my watchfulness! Another, and another!"

Mrs. Capron, indignant over this indifference to her fly-paper discomfort, now sought recognition of the damages she had sustained:

"I dun'no' will this plaguey stuff ever come off my

mohair! Well, I'll never set foot in *here* again! Say, Frenzy, I can send up one of my boys to-morrow and he'll clean up for you, fly-paper and all, for ten cents."

For a moment Miss Frenzy hesitated. She stood tall and sheltering over the rose-bush, the little shawl thrown over her shoulders lifted in the breeze. She looked something like a gray moth: her arms long and thin like antennæ, her spectacled eyes, gave her a moth's fateful look of flutter and blindness before light and scorching flame.

"You are most kind, but" — with a discouraged sigh — "it cannot be done."

"It can't be done?" hawked Mrs. Capron.

Mrs. Tyarck turned a sharp look of disapproval around the little garden, saying in a low tone, "It's reel sloven in here; she'd ought to do something for it."

"Yes," insisted Mrs. Capron, "you want cleaning up in here; that's what. That seedy grass! Them ragged vines! Your flowers overrun you — and that there fly-paper —"

Miss Frenzy sought to change the subject. With an air of obstinacy that sat curiously upon her, she directed the attention of her visitors to a young tree shooting up in green assurance.

"My mystery," she announced, with gentle archness. "Not planted by human hands. Undoubtedly a seed dropped by a bird in flight. A fruit-tree, I suspect — possibly cherry, but whether wild or of the domestic species remains to be seen; only the fruit will solve the enigma."

Mrs. Capron and Mrs. Tyarck regarded the little tree carelessly. "Wild," they pronounced as one woman, adding: "Wild cherry. When it's big, it will dirty your yard something fearful."

"I had a friend," related Mrs. Tyarck. "Her husband was a Mason. Seems she had a wild cherry-tree into her yard and she could never lay out a piece of light goods for bleachin' without fear of stains, and then the flies and the sparrers racketin' around all summer — why, it nearly druv her crazy!"

Miss Frenzy ignored these comments. "My mystery," she repeated, with reflecting eyes. "The seed dropped by a bird in flight. Only the fruit will solve the enigma."



With an air of ceremonious explanation, Miss Giddings turned to the two visitors. "I should acquaint you," she remarked in soft courtesy, "with the fact that, much as I regret the necessity of the fly-paper, it is, as you might say, *calculated*."

"Calculated!" With a gasp Mrs. Tyarck took off and began to polish her glasses; she kept two hard little eyes fixed on the speaker.

Mrs. Capron forgot to hawk. "*Calculated?*"

"It is to arrest the depredations of ants," confessed Miss Frenzy. She looked from one to the other with great dignity, supplementing: "I have long suffered greatly from the onslaughts of ants, both red and black. With the fly-paper, judiciously placed, I have hoped to curtail their activities."

It had grown a little grayer of twilight; the two visitors, trapped as it were within the high board enclosures, fenced all about with sweeps of tangled vine, the pale glimmering of ghostly blossoms, felt uncomfortable. With slow suspicion they moved away from one so frankly the author of gin and pitfall; from one who could so calmly admit that bits of fly-paper dribbling about her garden paths were "*calculated*." "Who was it," whispered Mrs. Tyarck, darkly—"who was it once said that Frenzy was sort of odd?" The two visitors moved instinctively toward a way of exit. With one more sigh Miss Frenzy reluctantly followed them. As they cast about in their minds for means of final reproof, she paused at the kitchen door. There, where a rain-barrel stood under a leader, was a bit of soap in a flower-pot saucer; seizing it, the old shopkeeper began vigorously washing her hands.

"Five waters," sighed Miss Frenzy—"five waters, before I can feel that my hands are in any degree cleansed!"

The others stood watching her. Instantly they seized the opportunity.

"Well, I should think so." Mrs. Capron hawked her superior virtue. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Frenzy. Nice work indeed you've been doin' with them hands! Murderin' and slayin'! Why can't you live and let live

(unless, of course, it's rats or mosquitoes)? Now you go and get the blood of them innercent worms on your shoulders! Why couldn't you let 'em go on feedin' where their Creator wanted 'em to feed?"

They looked at her.

"All them different cruelties," they commented—"fly-paper to track them ignorant ants onto, and that there trap for cats. . . . Well, you got more spots onto your soul than soap can take off. 'Thou shalt not kill,' it says. Why"—this burst of feeling from Mrs. Tyarck—"why, it's all I can do to set foot on a spider!"

"And look at me with wasps!" exclaimed Mrs. Capron. "How many wasps I've let go for their enjoyment of life, even though, for all I know, next thing they might sting me or one of mine."

Mrs. Capron, getting warm and virtuous, sat down in the kitchen doorway. Opening the netted catchall, she took out therefrom a bundle of tracts. This lady was the important local officer of many humanitarian societies and lost no opportunity to improve the morale of her community. The tract she selected for Miss Frenzy was of an impressive blue with the title, "Deal Tenderly with the Humble Animals that Cannot Speak."

"Now think of them ants," exhorted Mrs. Capron. She looked hard at Miss Frenzy Giddings. "Think of them thoughtless ants runnin' onto that fly-paper and not able to call out to the others what's happened to 'em!"

"You're like me," said Mrs. Tyarck. Taking her handkerchief, she wet it in the rain-barrel and obsequiously attempted to rub off a slight fly-paper stickiness still on the mohair of her friend. "You're like me. I'm that tender-hearted I can't even boil a lobster. I was so from a child. Come time the kettle boils it's Tyarck always has to put the lobster in—me all of a tremble!"

"And flies," suggested Mrs. Capron—"there's a many thinks that flies has got souls (though not the Board of Health). But even flies—look at me! I keep sugar and molasses for 'em in their own saucer, and if

they come to their last end that way, why, they must die likin' it, and it's what they chose for themselves."

Mrs. Capron drew the string of her netted catchall tight. She hawked, drew her upper lip down over the lower, and buttoned up the tight-fitting coat of mohair.

"Them cruelties of yourn will haunt you, Frenzy," summed up both ladies; "there's verses in the Bible for just such things," exclaimed the visitors together; then they all went in, the two friends turning their attention to Miss Giddings's household arrangements, offering her advice and counsel as to her clothes and the management of her kitchen range.

There were no more words about the cruelties except that that night in the long, wandering prayer in which Mrs. Capron, as leader of the meeting, had ample opportunity to score against any one whom she fancied delinquent, or against whom she had a private grudge, she inserted into her petition:

"And from all needless cruelties, keep us, O Lord. The bird that hops onto our sill" — Mrs. Capron did not specify whether sparrow or nightingale, but she implored fervently — "help us to remember it's one of Thy birds and set no snare for it, and the — er — the innercent creepin' things mindin' their own business and praisin' Thee — defend 'em from our impident croolties . . . help us to live and let live and refrain from all light-minded killin' and irreligious trap-settin'."

Little Johnnie Tyarck, sitting big-eared and thin-faced alongside of his mother's angular orisons, rubbed puzzled eyes. Johnnie wondered if Mrs. Capron, always severe in her attitude toward boys, could possibly have learned about those twenty-five hop-toads he had corralled in a sewer-pipe, carefully stopping up the ends of the pipe with mud and stones. The interned hop-toads had haunted Johnnie — and yet — and yet — Well, there was something insolent and forthputting about hop-toads — they breathed with their stomachs, had morose mouths, and proved themselves crassly superfluous and useless in the general scheme. Some one, it had seemed to Johnnie, should discipline hop-toads.

Behind Johnnie's wispy little head was the grizzled

one of Mr. Bloomby, the ragman. Mr. Bloomby, it was understood, was invariably haled to prayer-meeting by Mrs. Bloomby, a person of extreme virtue.

As Mrs. Capron's prayer to be defended from cruelties proceeded, Mr. Bloomby became rather hot under the celluloid collar he had extracted from recent collections of rags—he wondered if it could have possibly got round that he had once built a fire, a small but provocative fire, under a recalcitrant mule in order to persuade the mule to draw a load which he, Mr. Bloomby, deemed entirely adapted to the mule's capacity. Mr. Bloomby mentally confronted the inexperienced Supreme Being with data as to mules and the way a mule would try to get even with you.

But there was one person on whom Mrs. Capron's prayer made little, if any, impression. Miss Frances Giddings bowed her sallow face into her wobbly, gloved hand. "Five waters must I pass my hands through, O Lord," she prayed, "but never will I neglect Thy roses!" Into her mind swept clouds of fresh, heavenly bloom. With a dedication to beauty that she did not know was pagan, she lost herself in the dream of eternal gardening.

Nevertheless, the story of Frances Giddings's "cruelties" got about. There was much discussion over the dark revelations made by Mrs. Capron and Mrs. Tyarck. Morning wrappers conferred in basements; lead-wrapped crimps met in cellars; in church there were eyeglasses that glittered judgment. Just how was the village of Ivy Corners to look upon a person whose backyard was full of contraptions—this one for cats, that one for locusts; pitfalls for inquiring chickens, fly-paper for migrating ants! Under the amazing elasticity of village imagination it was finally evolved and told with indrawn breath that there had been cruelty like that "in the family." A Giddings, ancestor of Miss Frances, forgotten till now, but revamped for especial significance, was said to have been "dog-catcher," and in this governmental disguise to have inflicted incredible torments upon the stray animals of his impounding. Then came horrified descriptions of Miss Frenzy, head tied up, a flaming wad of newspaper on a broom, attacking the diaphanous in-



trenchments of caterpillars. These recitals, all working up to an hysterical crescendo, were pounded like so many coffin-nails in the final burial of a shy, gentle personality. Little by little the impression grew stronger that Miss Frenzy, though still out of jail, was both cruel and "queer," and between these judgments and her sensitive appreciation of them, the tall, stooping figure was seen less and less among intimate gatherings of Ivy Corners.

Months passed before another name came up for discussion; this time it was the name of the girl in the scarlet cap and sweater; a poor enough little country name; a name hardly destined for tragedy, but when the older townswomen had finished with it, it had become a foul thing—fouler, poor defenseless young name, than the great red-ember names of Catherine 'de' Medici or the Empress Faustine. When autumn dragged its gritty brown leaves into the gutters of Ivy Corners this name, too, had become nearly buried. The little scarlet coat had vanished from the town, but every door-knob seemed to be aware of its history, every window was alert and cold to face it down. White curtains, carefully tied back, seemed to wait primly for the moment when they also would be called to impress themselves upon any one who should be so bold as to try to win their immaculate favor.

Yet one winter night when the wind-blown trees seemed to try to claw the stars out of the sky, the girl in the scarlet coat did come back. There was a push at Miss Frenzy's door, the little shop bell jumped with a scared jangle. It was almost midnight; shadows shivered under the electric lights and the village streets were empty; a prickling drift of snow sifted past the blue bleakness of the windows. Things were at the relentless hour; a second desperate pull sent the store bell into a frightened spasm.

"Who's there?" quavered Miss Frenzy. She sat up; then, looking like a nut-colored Persian in her strange-figured wrapper, she got out of bed and held high the lamp that burned all night on her chair. The cold made her gray face quiver, but she shuffled bravely into the

store where the street light still flickered its bleak question.

On the shop floor lay a figure. Its abandon had a stark quality, as if it had been buffeted and abandoned to unappeased tortures of the elements. The old spinster, lamp in hand, leaned shivering over it. It was a little scrap of life's tragedy that had blown like a dead leaf in Miss Frenzy's path; she was not prepared for it. "Not dead? Not dead?" she quavered. Well, yes, it was dead. Miss Frenzy could see animation, the thing we call "life," but even she knew that it was dead youth, with all its fairy powers lost, that she looked upon. She bent closely to stricken lips that muttered a tuneless kind of song:

*"The night train. . . . If I go back, if I go back . . ."* There was a long silence and then the young voice chanted, deliriously, *"In Miss Frenzy's garden . . . the fences are high . . ."*

The girl's body lay with the stamp of primal woe fixed indelibly upon it. It was wastage in the social scheme, yet it had something of torn petal, of wind-blown butterfly, of wings that had been frozen while fluttering at the very center of the flower of life. Protest dragged at Miss Frenzy's heart.

"Young," muttered the cracked voice. "Young." The tears tore to the near-sighted eyes. Out of the old maid's defeated being came the curious sense of being true to something; of loyalty to hidden forces life had hitherto kept her from recognizing. As she might have raised a vestal virgin struck down by her flame she raised the piteous form. Staggering to her deserted bed, Miss Frenzy laid the girl in its warmth. She drew off the wrecked red clothing, she made a hot drink and got it somehow between the locked lips. "There, there!" sobbed Miss Frenzy. She knew that "There, there" was what mothers said to their hurt children, and yet she was not a mother — and this — oh, this was not a child!

When at last the exhausted frame shuddered down to sleep the old storekeeper moved away, shutting the bedroom door. She went back into the shop and roamed restlessly hither and yon. The electric light had gone out

and dawn was stealing in. On every hand some article of woman's clothing interrogated her. Lace collars, immaculate in their set pattern, swayed fastidiously from her absent touch; the cards of buttons eyed her curiously; bolts of smooth, conventional satin ribbon conveyed calm judgments. With a frightened look, she turned out the lamp and sat sleepless at the store window. . . .

All that winter Miss Frenzy held her little fort alone; her gentle face grew sterner, her careful speech more and more stilted. To all inquiries, curious, suave, or critical, she returned the invariable statement:

"I have long been in need of an assistant. This young girl is bright and willing; her friends have, most regretably, cast her off—" A dark flush would come into Miss Frenzy's face as she forced herself to add: "It appears that she has had a sad experience. . . . I intend to befriend her."

An attitude like this held by a character already under the ban of local disapproval seemed to have only one significance for the leaders of thought in Ivy Corners. It conveyed to such leaders blatant immorality, the countenancing of a sinner who should be made to pay the full penalty for a misstep. Mrs. Tyarck, head held high, was theatrically outraged. With superb ostentation she took to patronizing the "other" dry-goods shop, where, in order to put down vice, she bought things of which she disapproved, did not want, or already possessed duplicates. At this store she made gloomy remarks, such as, "Ef we ain't careful we'll be back ag'in in Godom and Sommarah." No one noticed the slight inaccuracy of pronunciation, but the angle of the wing on Mrs. Tyarck's hat proclaimed to the world at large the direction of her virtuous sentiments.

Mrs. Capron, however, laid a loftier plan of attack. Entering the little shop of an evening, she would plant herself before the counter, sigh heavily, and produce from the knobby catch-all a tract. This she would hand to the drooping girl in attendance, saying, solemnly, "*There is things, young woman, as will bear thinkin' on.*" Several days later the methodical Mrs. Capron would return with another tract, commanding, as one in

authority, "Give that to your mistaken benefactor." She would then hawk once with juridic deliberation, stare into the stricken young face, and majestically depart.

But spring, which, when it brings the surge of sap in the trees, also brings back something like kindness and pity in the withered human heart, came to Ivy Corners with its old tender ministry, until the very tufts of grass between the village stones had an air of escape from confining limitations; and until the little store's isolation was pierced by one or two rays of human warmth. The minister's wife called. One or two mothers of large families invented shopping errands in order to show some measure of interest in the young life Miss Frenzy was helping back to usefulness and sanity. The girl's shamed eyes, eyes that would probably never again meet the world's with the gaze of square integrity, often rested like tired birds in looks of sympathy and encouragement. Such persons as displayed these qualities, however, were sharply disapproved by the more decided voices in village conclaves.

"There is things which has limits," criticized Mrs. Tyarck. This lady, in her effort to convey her idea of sustained condemnation, even went so far as once more to enter the little shop to inquire the price of some purple veiling hanging seductively in the window. Miss Giddings herself waited on the shopper; the girl sat near by cutting fresh paper for the shelves.

"I ain't here because I'm any the less scandalized," began Mrs. Tyarck in a loud whisper. "Your own reputation was none too safe, Frenzy, that you should go and get a Jezebel to keep store for you. Are you goin' to reduce that veilin' any? I know it's loud, but Tyarck always wants I should dress young."

Then there was short silence. The veiling was measured and cut off. Miss Giddings wrapped up the purple net without speaking. Under her glasses her eyes shot fire, her long face was suffused, but she spoke no word. Mrs. Tyarck leaned over the counter, her face poked between rows of hanging black stockings, taking on a look of bland counsel.

"It's on account of them cruelties of yours," she ex-



plained — continuing with ostentatious secrecy, “you ain’t in no position to take up for this girl, Frenzy.”

Then the whispers grew louder and louder until they were like hisses. Mrs. Tyarck’s head darted forward like a snake’s. At last in the back of the store the girl’s head fell forward, her weak shoulders were shaken by helpless sobs.

The hands of the old shopkeeper fumbling with the package trembled, but Miss Frenzy appeared outwardly calm. Before counting out change, however, she paused, regarding the shopper musingly.

“Pardon me. Did I rightly hear you use the word ‘cruelties’?” she questioned. To an onlooker her manner might have seemed suspiciously tranquil.

“Yes — cruelties,” repeated the other, patronizingly. “There’s no use denying it, Frenzy — there’s that fly-paper loomin’ up before you! There’s them cat-traps and killin’ devices, and, as if it was n’t bad enough, what must you do but go and take up with a girl that the whole town says is —”

There was a sudden curious cessation of the speaker’s words. This was caused by a very sudden action on the part of Miss Giddings. Desperately seizing on a pair of the hanging black stockings, she darted with incredible swiftness around the end of the counter. With a curious sweep of her long arms she passed the black lengths around the shopper’s mouth, effectively muffling her.

“Cruelties!” gasped the old shopkeeper. “Cruelties indeed! You will [gasp] be so good [gasp] as to take the word cruelties and go home and reflect upon it.”

“Hey?” gasped Mrs. Tyarck. “Hey? Now, now, now!” Over the black gag her eyes looked frightened and uncomprehending. She suddenly saw herself in the grasp of the heaver and squeezer, of the chewers and suckers, and was full of consternation. “You’ve no call to get excited, Frenzy,” she mumbled through the cottony thicknesses of stocking; then, as she worked her mouth out of its leash, “I’ll have the law on you, Frenzy Giddings!”

“Leave the store!” was Miss Frenzy’s sole response. She said it between set jaws. She suddenly let go of the

stockings and they dropped to the floor. She picked up the parcel of purple veiling and cast it through the door into the gutter. She stood, tall and withering, pointing with inexorable finger; then, as Mrs. Tyarck, the gag removed, began to chatter fierce intimations of reprisal the old shopkeeper's eyes again flashed.

"Cruelties!" repeated Miss Frenzy, dwelling scornfully upon the word—"cruelties! Yes, I understand your reference." She kept on pointing to the open door. "You refer to the worms, to those creatures that ate and defaced helpless roses; tender young things that could n't help themselves. . . . Very well. I am still, as it were, inexorable toward worms! So," with a shrill, excited laugh, "I still heave them and squeeze them. Therefore depart—worm! Leave the store!"

"*Worm?*" questioned Mrs. Tyarck, faintly. This lady had suddenly lost all her assurance, the very upstanding wing in her hat became spiritless. She looked aghast, puzzled. Her eyes, like those of a person in a trance, wandered to the package of purple veiling lying outside in the gutter, and she tried to rally. "Worm! Now look here, Frenzy Giddings, I don't know whether it's assault and battery to call a person such names, or whether it's slander, but I tell you the law has had people up for saying less than 'worm.'"

"But I said 'worm,'" repeated the old shopkeeper, firmly—"worms, contemptible and crawling, chewers and suckers of reputations; you and Mrs. Capron, the whole town (with lamentably few exceptions) are a nest of small, mean, crawling, contemptible worms. . . . Worms, I repeat, worms!"

"Frenzy Giddings!" whispered the shocked Mrs. Tyarck. She stood frozen in horror under the last hissing, unsparing indictment, then turned and fled. As she scuttled, almost whimpering, through the door she was followed by the ceaseless, unsparing epithet, "Worm!"

The shopkeeper's protégée found her stiff and still unyielding, bowed over the counter, her forehead reddened with shame, her hands twisted together in self-loathing.

"Get me some hot tea, my dear," gasped Miss Frenzy. She still shook and her voice was as the voice of a dying

person. The fine raiment of courtesy and punctilious speech that she had all her life worn had been torn from her by her own fierce old hands; in her own gentle eyes she was hopelessly degraded. Yet she smiled triumphantly at the anxious young face of the girl as she proffered the steaming tea. "Young," muttered Miss Frenzy, her eyes following the movements of the other. "Young."

At last she roused herself and went slowly toward the door of the little private room, the girl hurrying to assist her. She paused, took the dark young head between her wrinkled hands, and kissed it. "I called her a 'worm,' my dear," said Miss Frenzy. "It was a regrettable circumstance, but she accused me of cruelties—cruelties? . . . I called her a 'worm.'" The old shop-keeper's eyes twinkled. "On the whole, I am glad I did so."

Later, when the roses came again and the two sat with their sewing in the little garden, Miss Frenzy cheerfully remarked upon the entire absence of rose-worms. "Without conceit," she remarked—"without conceit, I should be inclined to say that the Lord has endorsed my activities." She looked affectionately at the slender figure sewing near the honeysuckle and called attention to the young cherry-tree shooting up in green assurance.

"My mystery!" announced Miss Frenzy. "Not planted by human hands. The seed doubtless dropped by a bird in flight. Whether the fruit will be sweet or bitter is to me a matter of pleasing conjecture."